

The Pharaoh's Favorite

Chapter 4

I kept walking, fists clenched at my sides, my gaze fixed ahead and anger bubbling just beneath the surface. Kiya, as always, seemed entirely unaffected.

She walked beside me, her sandals whispering against stone, while rage burned in my chest like poison.

"You're awfully quiet, sister," she said, breaking the silence. Her tone was honey sweet, but strangely full of concern. "Are you upset about last night?"

I stopped abruptly, turning to face her.

"Am I upset?" I hissed, my voice shaking with suppressed fury. "You betrayed me, Kiya. You humiliated me and ruined everything I've dreamed for."

"Oh, I see now," she continues, "After what you saw me and your beloved Sahety by the river... though really, sister, you shouldn't have spied on such a private moment."

"Private?" I whirl to face her. "You wanted me to see it. You looked right at me and smiled."

"Oh, sister, don't be so dramatic. I simply showed you the truth. Sahety was never yours to keep – you were just too blind to see it."

My chest tightened, her casual cruelty slicing through me.

"And that makes it acceptable?" I snapped. "You've disgraced yourself and our family. Do you even care about what you've done?"

Kiya's expression didn't waver. If anything, she seemed amused.

"Care?" she repeated, laughing lightly. "Why should I care? What's the point of feeling guilty over something that needed to be done?"

"Needed to be done?" I echoed, disbelief mingling with my rage. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't understand, do you?" Kiya's smile widened, her eyes glittering with malice. "I never wanted this life. Not the harem, not Sahety, not the endless expectations Father

heaps on us. I want freedom, Neferet. Real freedom. And if breaking you was the price I had to pay, so be it.”

Understanding hit me like a physical blow.

While she'd played the perfect daughter, preparing for Pharaoh's harem, she'd been plotting her escape all along. I was merely collateral damage in her game.

Her words left me momentarily stunned. “You are ready to destroy everything... for your selfish dreams?” I whispered. “You... you're unbelievable.”

“It's enough to act so wounded, sister,” Kiya said sharply. “You should be thanking me instead. Now you're free to dedicate yourself to your precious goddess. Isn't that what you always wanted?”

I stop dead. Turn slowly to face her. The dawn light catches her perfect features – features that hide a heart of stone.

“Thank you?” My voice comes out as a whisper. “You destroyed everything I dreamed of, and you want me to thank you?”

She resumed walking, forcing me to follow. “The world doesn't revolve around your perfect little dreams, Neferet. Maybe it's time for you to realize that.”

“And what about Sahety?” I clenched my fists, struggling to keep my composure. “Did you think he would choose you after what you've done? Did you think Father wouldn't punish you for this?”

Kiya's expression faltered for the first time, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face. But she recovered quickly, her voice cold and cutting.

“I'll deal with Father. And as for Sahety? He'll come around. Men always do.”

Her words chilled me to the core. This wasn't just selfishness or arrogance. This was something darker, something twisted.

“You... you're a monster,” I whispered.

“Call me whatever you want, sister. But at least I'm honest about who I am.” Kiya laughed again, the sound sharp and mocking. “Can you say the same?”

I stared at her, her betrayal crushing me down. For all her beauty and charm, Kiya's soul was as cold as the stone statues of the gods. And yet, no amount of anger or sorrow could change what she had done. All I could do now was endure.

The house came into view, and with it, the harsh reality of what lay ahead. Kiya quickened her pace, slipping effortlessly back into the role of the dutiful daughter.

Our parents waited at breakfast, the morning light streaming through painted windows as if this were any other day.

I followed reluctantly, bracing myself for the storm that was sure to come.

“Neferet!” Mother’s sharp voice cuts through the morning air. “How dare you stay out until dawn? And with your sister in your care!”

Of course.

Once again, I would bear the blame while Kiya escaped notice. All these years I played the responsible eldest daughter, covering for Kiya’s schemes, protecting her secrets – it all came crashing down.

“Where have you been?” Mother’s voice cracked like a whip. “Dawn is no time for a respectable girl to return home.”

Something snaps inside me.

It is always my fault.

It is always my responsibility.

While Kiya – sweet, adored, beautiful Kiya – can do no wrong.

But wait. A thought strikes me, cold and clear as temple water. My “clever” sister hasn’t thought this through.

Yes, her night with Sahety might keep her from the Golden House – but Father won’t let such shame go unpunished. He’ll try to marry her off faster than she can blink, crushing her dreams of freedom as thoroughly as she’s crushed mine.

The thought fills me with savage satisfaction.

“You want to know where we were, Mother?” The words burst from me like flames. “Ask your perfect youngest daughter what she was doing in the reeds with my betrothed!”

Silence fell like a blade.

Kiya didn’t even flinch. This was part of her plan too, I realized with growing horror. She wanted to be exposed. But she’d overlooked one crucial detail – Father’s pride.

"I'm done," I continue, yanking the ruby ring from my finger. "Done with this engagement. Done taking responsibility for her actions. Done watching her destroy everything she touches while you all look the other way!"

The ring hits the table with a sound like destiny shattering.

Silence stretches thick as honey. Father sets down his cup with deliberate care.

"You speak of destruction," he says slowly, "but you fail to see the opportunity the gods have provided."

My stomach drops. I don't like his tone.

"Clearly," he continues, "Sahety must marry Kiya now, to preserve what honor can be salvaged."

I looked at Kiya, expecting triumph. Instead, I saw something flicker in her eyes – regret? Fear? Rage.

"No!" Kiya's mask shattered. She leapt up, knocking over her wine cup. Red spread across the table like blood. "I won't be sold like cattle to any man!"

He pauses, and I see the trap too late. "And you, Neferet." Father's eyes found mine, ignoring her outburst. "You will take your sister's place in the Golden House."

The world tilted beneath my feet. "What?"

"I won't do it." She knocked a plate to the floor. It shattered like our family's facade. "I'd rather die than-"

The crack of Father's hand against her cheek echoed through the room. Kiya stumbled, caught herself against a column. Blood trickled from her split lip.

"You dishonor yourself. Your family. Years of your preparation wasted." Each word was punctuated by another blow. I watched, frozen, as my little sister crumpled under our father's rage. "Everything – the dancing lessons, the poetry, the beauty treatments – all for nothing!"

Mother turned away, silent tears tracking her kohl. I clutched my amulet, its edges biting into my palm. This was what Kiya's rebellion had brought us – violence and shame where there should have been celebration.

When Father finally stepped back, Kiya lay curled on the floor, her perfect face already swelling. But her eyes – they still burned with defiance through the tears.

"I will never submit," she whispered.

Father's answer was another blow.

"No." The word comes out strangled. "Father, please. I'm meant for the temple. My dreams, my powers—"

"Are gifts that will serve Pharaoh well." His voice hardens. "Our family promised a daughter to the harem. The gods themselves have shown us which daughter it must be."

"But... but we know nothing about him!" Panic claws at my throat. "He only just took the throne. Some say he's cruel, others say he's mad—"

"Enough!" Father's fist hits the table. "You will do your duty to this family. To Egypt. An opportunity to bear a child of Pharaoh, touched by the divine, is the highest honor —"

"Honor?" I laugh, and it sounds like breaking. "Like the honor your younger daughter showed last night?"

The slap catches me by surprise. Not from Father – he can't mark my face now that I'm meant for Pharaoh, not with his strength. So it was Mother who struck, her rings leaving fire across my cheek.

"You will not speak to your father this way," she hisses. "You will accept this blessing with gratitude."

I touch my burning cheek, feeling the betrayal of my own blood rising like floodwater.

Kiya's eyes meet mine across the room – no longer smug, but burning with something darker. We're both trapped now, in different cages of her making.
